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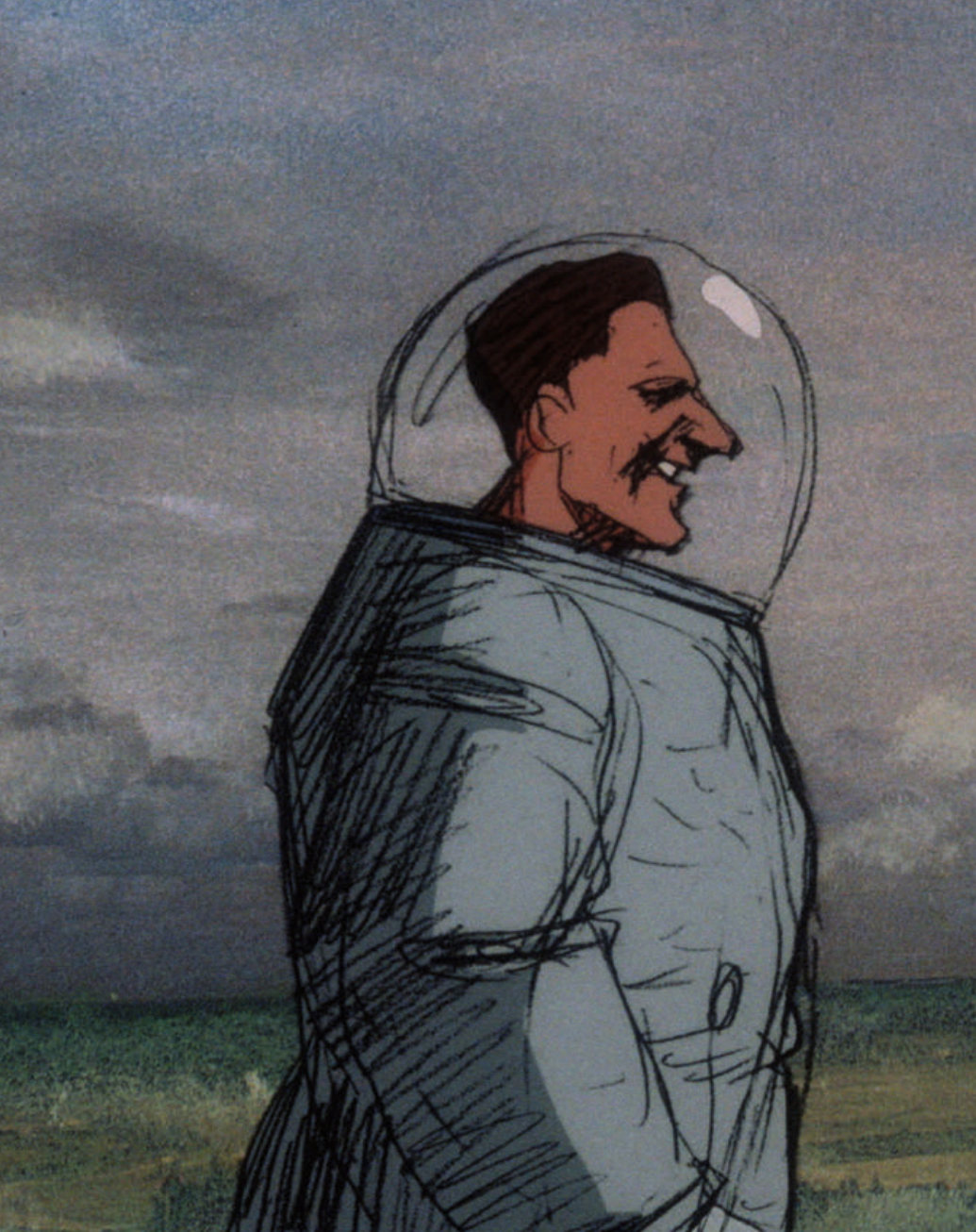
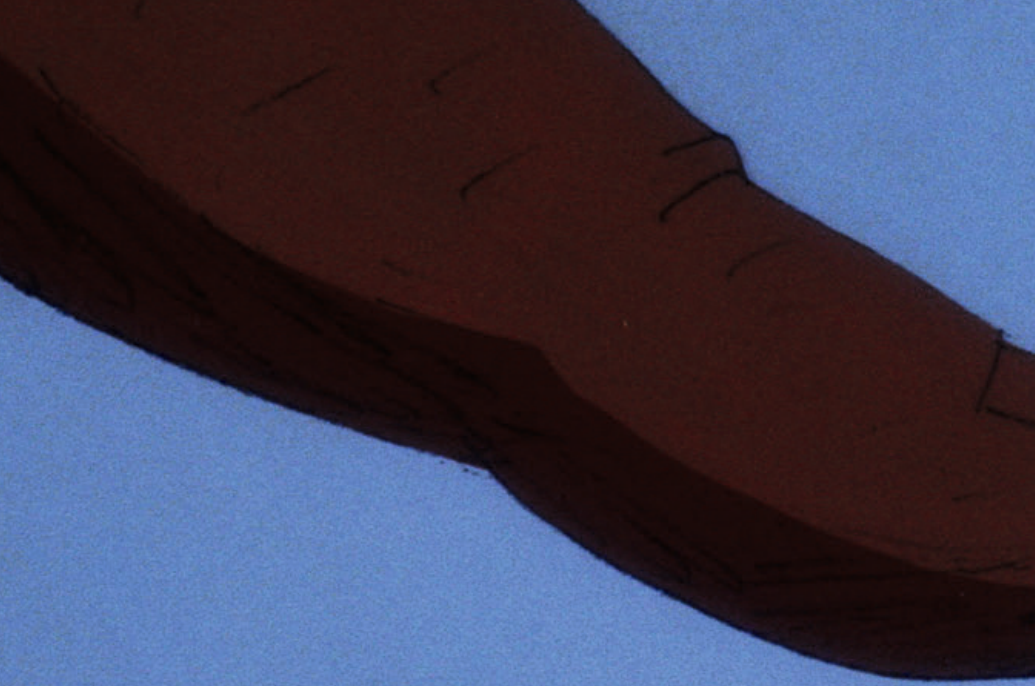
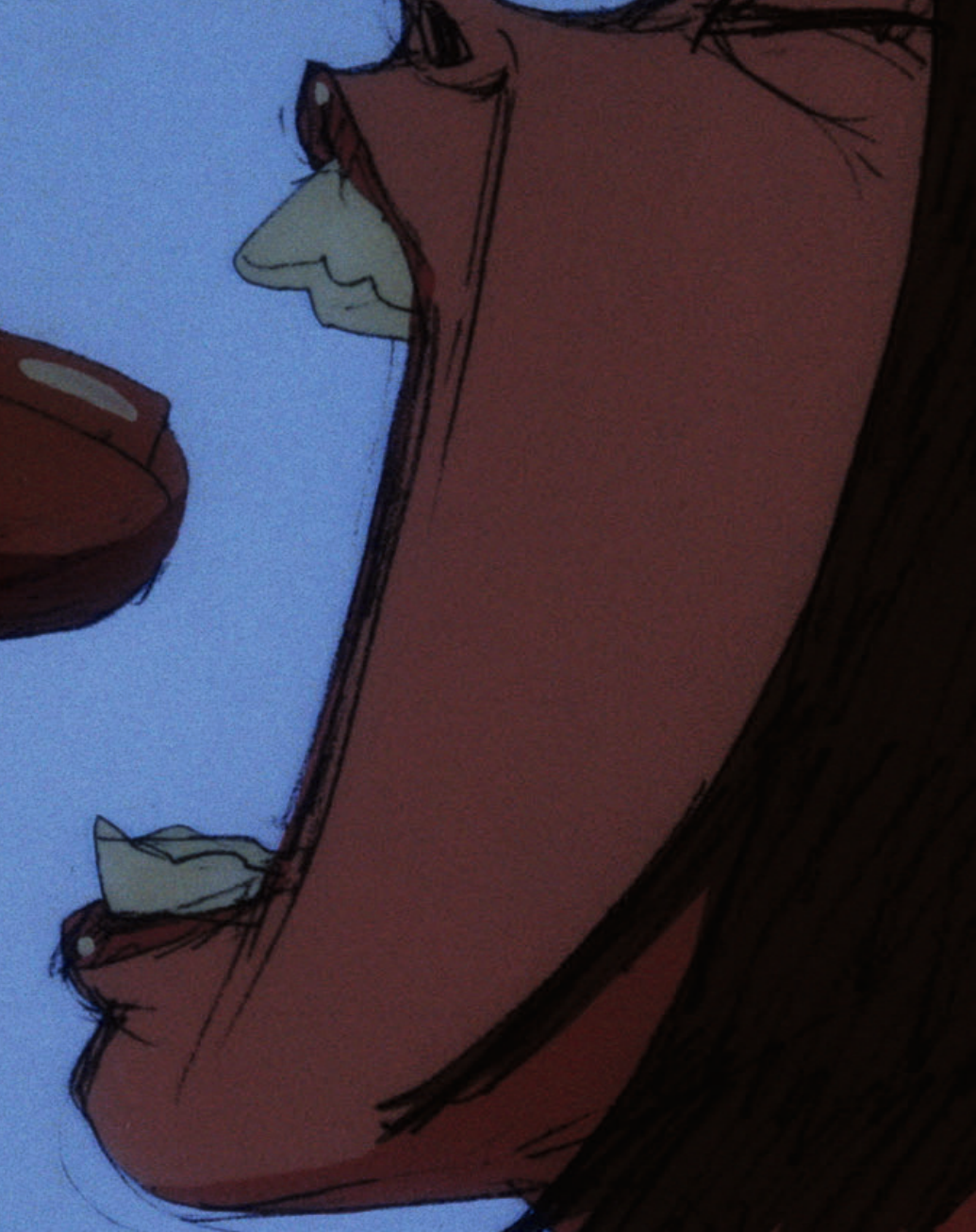


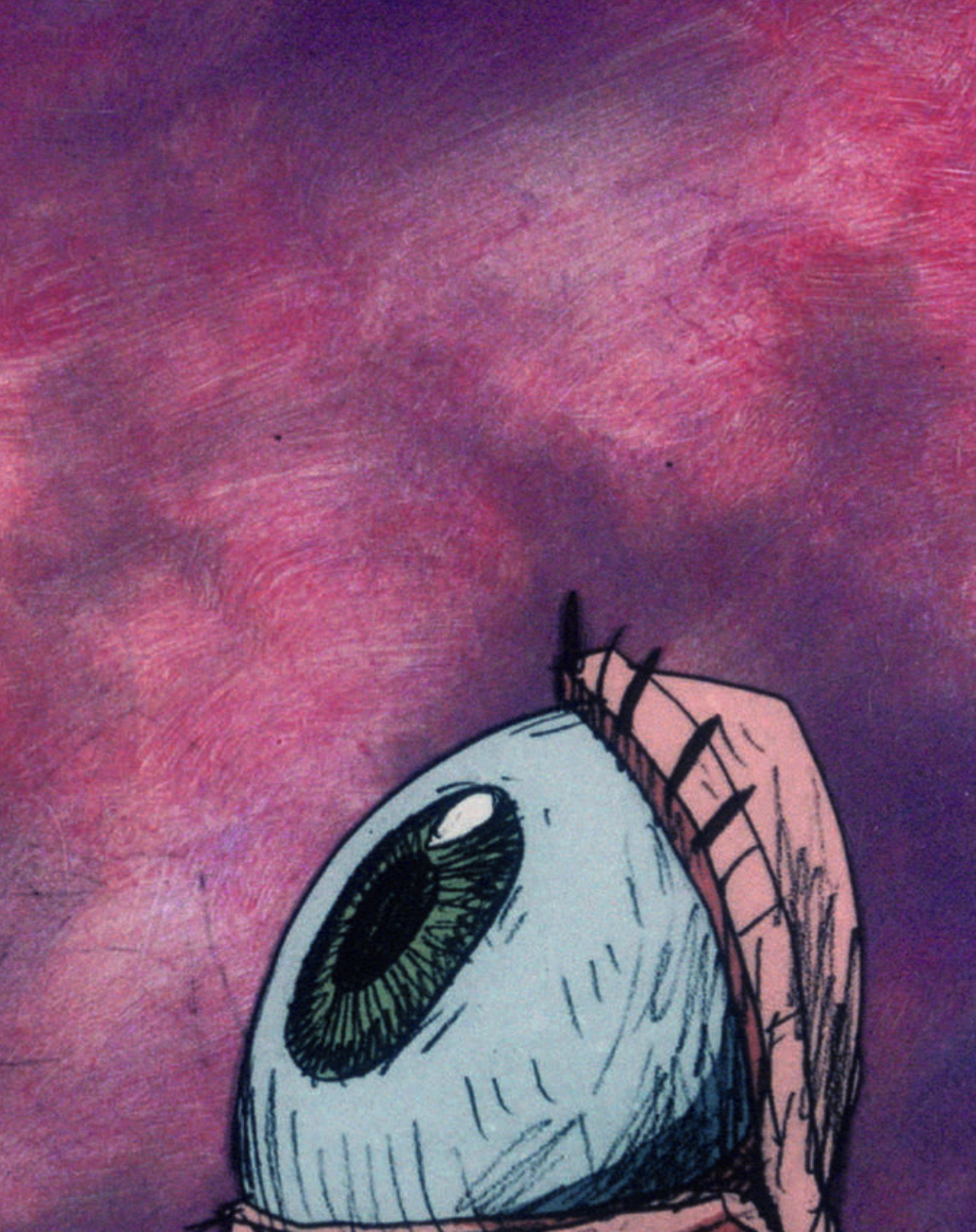


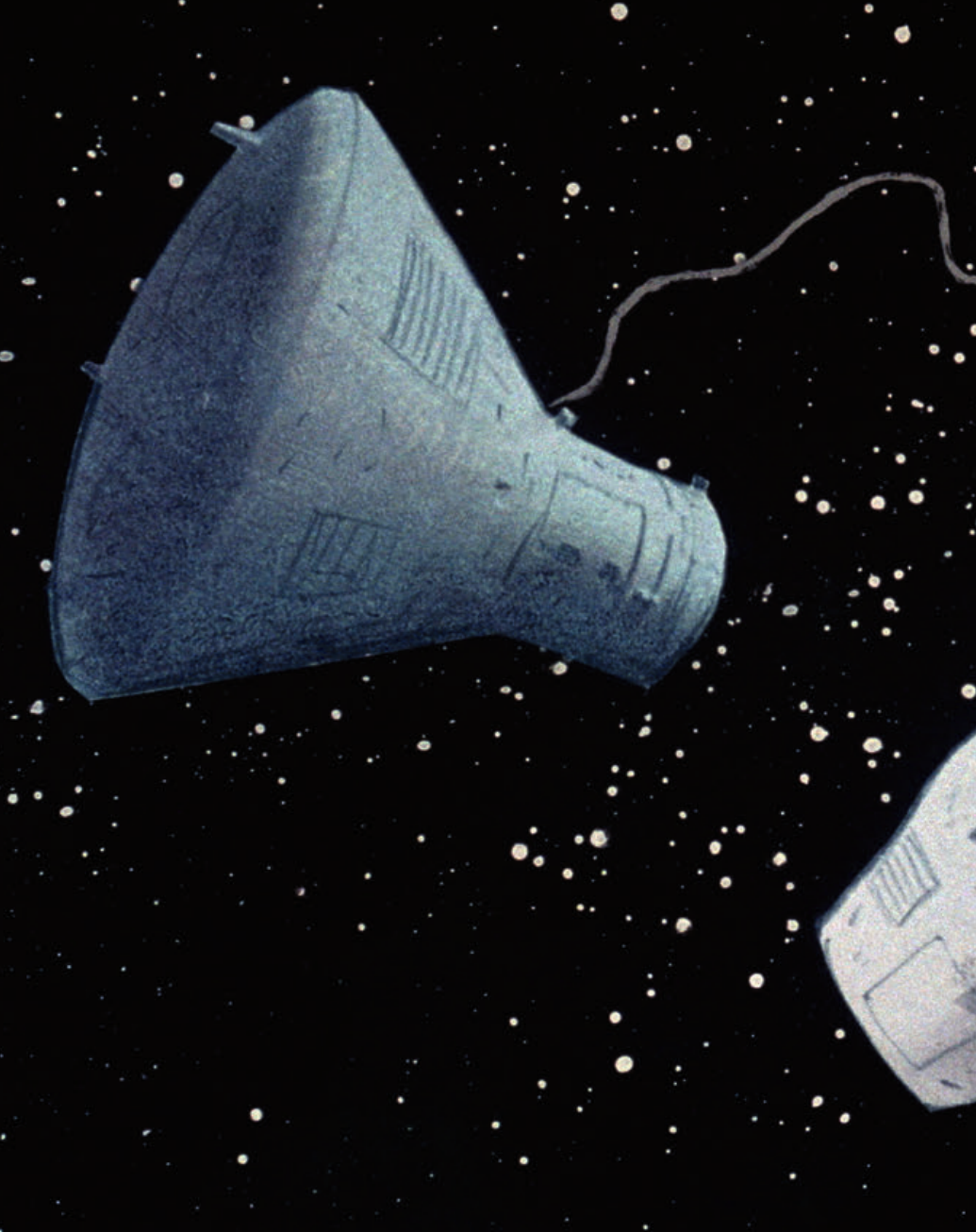


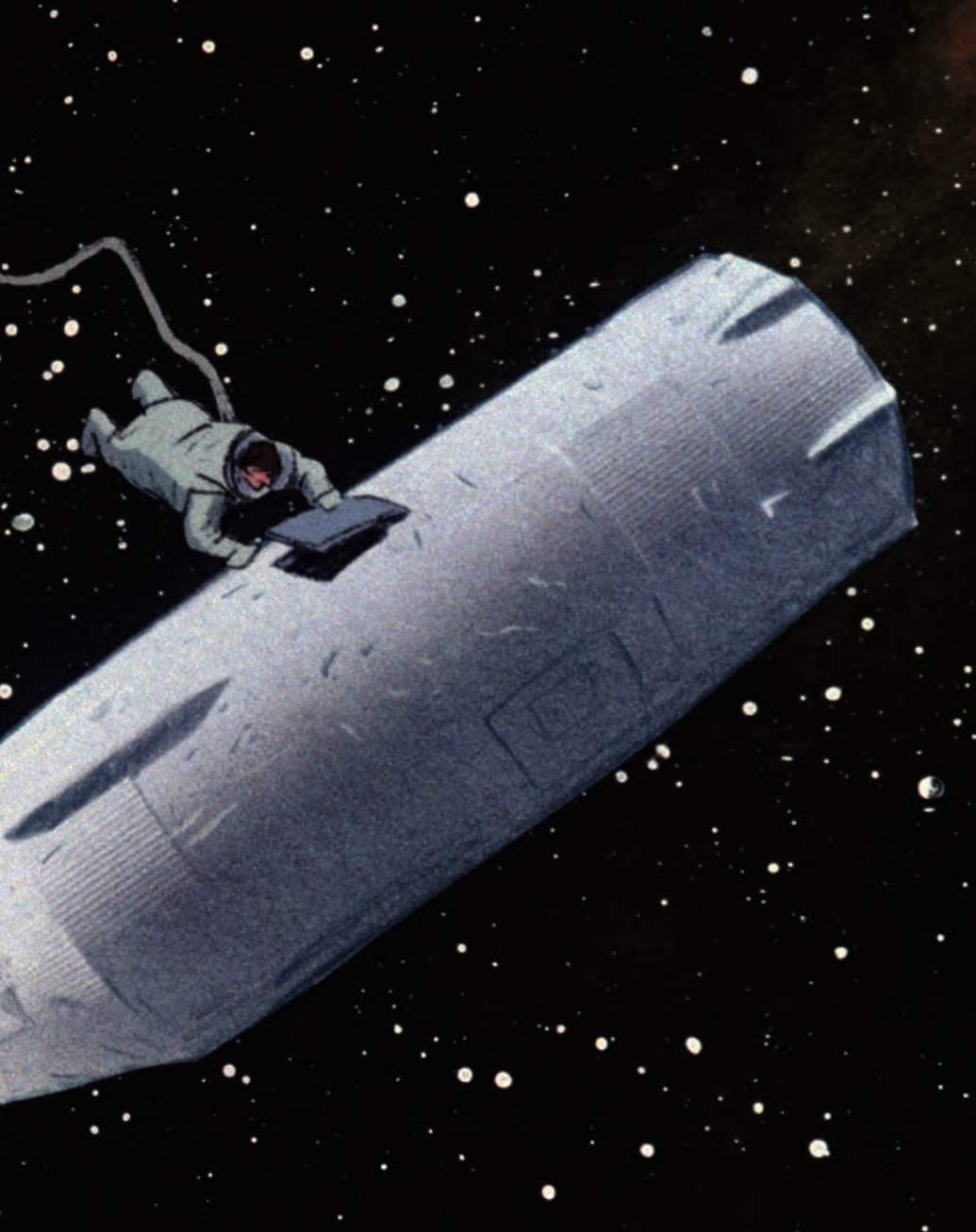
INTRODUCTION

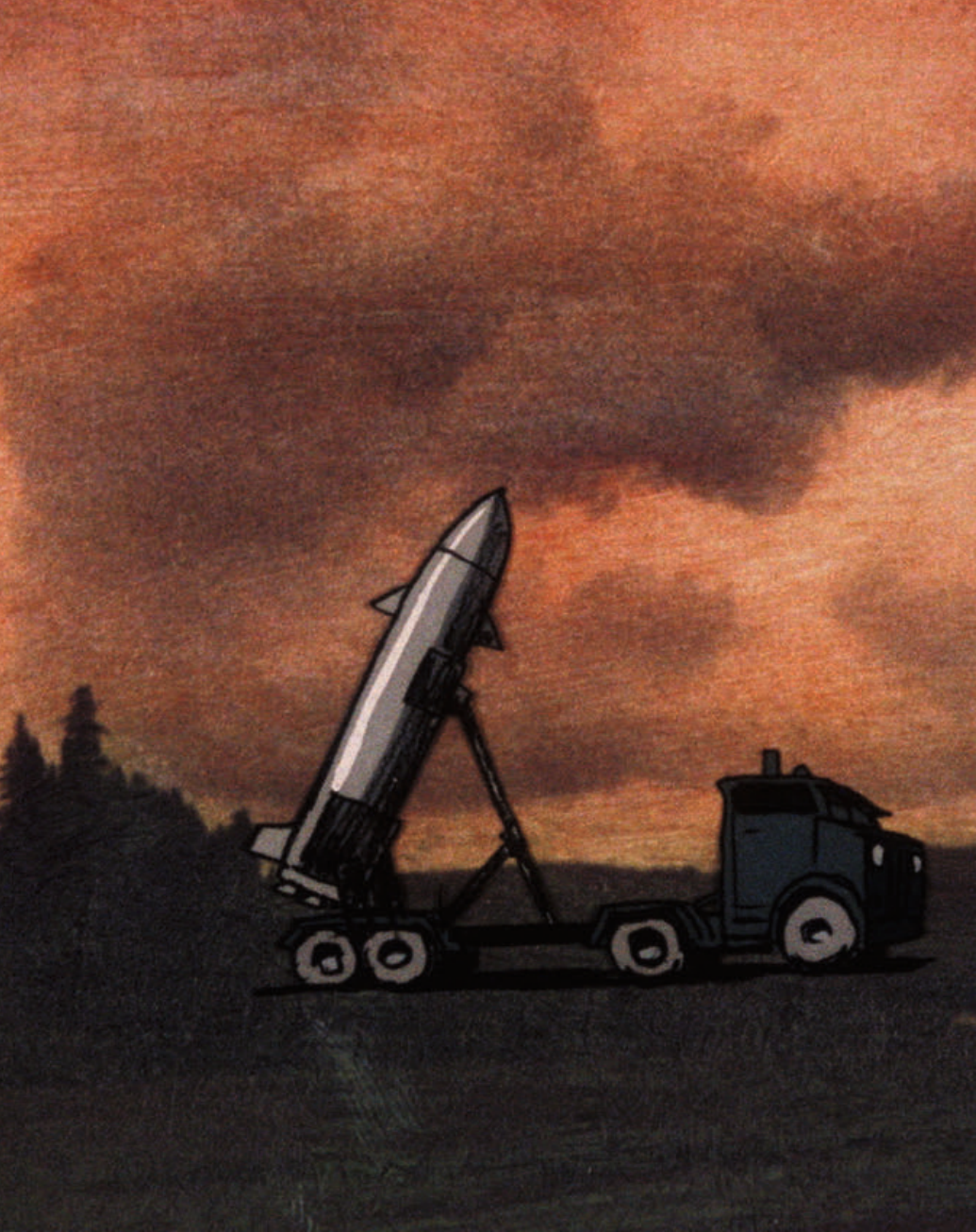
I've been friends with Bill Plympton for several decades now, but I've been an enormous fan of his work for slightly longer. I'm proud to say that he's animated a number of my music videos over the years, including "TMZ," "Don't Download This Song" and "Polkamania!" His work has always blown my mind. It continually amazes me how he's able to share his incredibly warped imagination with the world one frame at a time. *I Married a Strange Person!* and *Mutant Aliens* are two wonderful examples of his twisted genius, and solid proof of why he's universally considered one of the greatest cartoonists in the world.

Weird Al Yankovic









MUTANT ALIENS

by

Walter Chaw

There is an issue of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* run that resurrects a dusty character from the DC vaults called "Prez Rickard." Prez is the youngest President of the United States, an emblem of hope elected at nineteen due to an adjustment of the Constitution, who is asked repeatedly for his unquestioning servitude by a mysterious entity called "Boss Smiley." Boss looks a lot like "Mr. Melancholy," the antagonist of Jane Schoenbrun's remarkable diary of the horror of difference and of roads not taken *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) and it's through that similarity that I began to understand more about what this peculiar "one-shot" meant and why, as a consequence, it has always been one of my favorite moments in *The Sandman*. Boss Smiley is corruption, that was always clear, the God of this world, but he's also the inevitability of experience - the inescapable erosion, like the enamel on your teeth through time and use, of faith that unfailingly happens as the steep price for more life. At the beginning of his second term, Prez's fiancé is assassinated and Smiley offers her resurrection in exchange, again, for Prez's obedience. Prez declines, but he also fails to complete a second term as revolutionary as his first and disappears from the public stage until his quiet death. I think the story is about patriotism, too, how we love our country for a while until the point at which we learn too much about it and "just like that" in a thunderous finger snap, nothing is as simple as it used to be and the sense of who we are destabilizes until who we were disappears.

I mention this as preamble to Bill Plympton's foray into science fiction (to the extent all of his work isn't already science fiction), *Mutant Aliens* (2001) - a piece that could be read in any number of ways, but most fruitfully as a piece about the corrosive effects of time on our naive fidelity to childish notions of God and country. That's where it starts. There are strong H.G. Wells influences throughout the film, too, starting with an introduction in which a live broadcast captures the landing of a mysterious

vehicle in the middle of a field. We never actually see it over a crowd of looky-loos. Being forced to use our imagination is an homage, I suspect, to Orson Welles' infamous Mercury Theater radio production of *War of the Worlds.* The reporter (Vera Beren) tells us the spaceship is opening, then pandemonium as a deadly, apparently, interstellar invasion pours out. The "aliens" are the mutants of the title, various forms of genetically *adjusted* domestic wildlife (well, a frog and chipmunk, too, so, if not "domestic" at least not terribly exotic) that have been perverted, The Island of Dr. Moreau-style by American hero astronaut Earl Jensen (voiced by Dan McComas). (Toss in a helping of another Wells novel, The Food of the Gods here, too, once the critters run amuck, why not?). Jensen who has left a little girl, Josie (Thea Button as little girl Josie, Francine Lobis as adult Josie) behind; Jensen who has been betrayed by the head of the Department of Space, Dr. Fubar (George Casden) when all of his space capsule's fuel is jettisoned because Jensen makes a better martyr for fundraising than he does a national hero engaged in the enlargement of human knowledge for its own sake.

In the modern conversation, we mostly know H.G. Wells for the speculative masterpieces completed largely before 1900. For me, I always thought of him as a great social humanist, arm-in-arm with Jules Verne as an artist invested in a fecund future for mankind despite the post-apocalyptic dystopia Wells suggests in The Time Machine. Indeed, the books he wrote after the turn of the century - the ones that tried on pedantic socialism; that, eschewed formalism; that, especially after the horrors of WWI, descended into a specific variety of real despair for the human race - are under-read at best, unknown entirely at worst. His last book, Mind at the End of Its Tether (1945) predicts the end of the human race in a fleet fifty pages, to be replaced at some point on Earth by an entirely different intelligence. He describes the end of us this way:

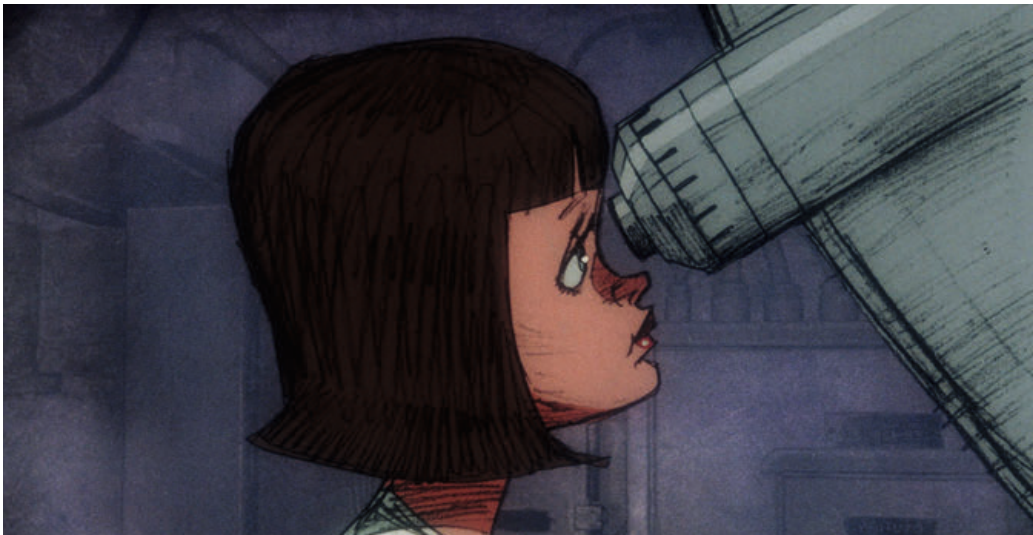
> It never comes like a thunderclap. That *Halt!* comes to this one today and that one next week. To the remnant, there is always, "What next?" We may be spinning more and more swiftly into the vortex of extinction, but we do not apprehend as much. To those of us who do not die there is always a tomorrow in this world of ours, which, however it changes, we are accustomed to accept as Being Normal.

Celebrated as an animal that knows its fate, we yet have an incredible capacity for compartmentalizing the augurs of our own extinction. It's a practiced solipsism - a panic reaction, if we're kind, that refuses to allow us to see how near we are to the end. Wells again:

> The reality glares coldly and harshly upon any of those who can wrench their minds from the comforting delusions of normality to face the unsparing question that has overwhelmed the writer. They discover a frightful queerness has come into life. Even quite unobservant people now are betraying, by fits and starts, a certain wonder, a shrinking and fugitive sense that something is happening so that life will never be *quiet* the same again.

I don't think it's an accident that Plympton chooses Wells as the foundation for his science-fiction opus. Not just because he wrote a few of the most famous pieces in the genre, but because, like Plympton, genre was less a consideration for Wells than his worldview. Wells the humanist, Wells the socialist and eventually Wells the disillusioned, the rattled, the wisdom bringing no profit to the wise. In just the first few minutes of *Mutant Aliens*, there's a massive loss of civilian life reported on live and occurring just off-camera. The camera tilts, the lens cracks, the reporter screams "you can't do that! That's my producer!" just before an explosion of blood and… parts flies across the screen. In 2001, Internet connections were still dial-up, news was still largely analogue (until 9/11 "launched" the eternal news cycle), Yahoo was king and YouTube was still four years away. Plympton is predicting the unblinking eye of infinite connection: the unslakable hunger for "product" in the streaming age. We have always been hungry for atrocity, but there were limits to what we could see in the privacy of our homes until the Internet made grindhouses just a locked door and drawn blinds away. *Mutant Aliens* is about to be lawless and it begins by suggesting off the bat that this invasion is much more like the sad resolution of *The Outer Limits*' "The Architects of Fear." The only thing to fear is not fear itself, but that it's all an inside job… all of it, and the malefactors are every person we put in power to protect us looking to make a quick buck at our expense. The first lesson of *Mutant Aliens* is we're gullible rubes and our lives are only worth a coerced vote and maybe a few bucks to the campaign.

Plympton introduces astronaut Jensen in a series of scatalogical, Benny Hill jokes: disembodied hands scrubbing ample cleavage turn out to be washing Jensen's sculpted buttocks; the unshaven "V" of a voluptuous woman's vulva in a shower turns out to be Jensen's widow's peak atop his perfectly-proportioned face. The kind of groaners I enjoy, they serve the purpose of satirizing how we fetishize the cult of masculinity in the United States: the Malboro Man archetype and the reason they got Sam Shepherd to play Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*. American heroes are rapscallions. They are cowboys and outlaws; test pilots and stuntmen; astronauts and soldiers putting their lives on the line for God, Country and Glory. Plympton turns Jensen into both an icon and a product that has been manufactured in a sense, spit-shined and polished, and shunted into a uniform that represents an ideal. When he walks down a ramp, he does it in a hero's slow-motion. Dr. Fubar (a wartime anagram for "Fucked Up Beyond All Repair") on the other hand, in businessman attire, is dressed as the modern bogeyman of neo-robber baron and unctuous, reptilian politician. He pumps Jensen up to an adoring crowd, he shakes Jensen's hand too long and too hard, but he can't fool Jensen's little girl, Josie. Josie hates Fubar on sight. Josie is the only witness to Fubar hitting the button that dooms her father to what he hopes will be oblivion in deep space and Josie is the avenger, biting off one of Fubar's fingers and refusing to regurgitate or pass it. Josie's will is strong.



It's an important detail, this "disarming" because it functions as a kind of castration of the things Fubar represents. Without an index finger, he loses some of his ability to be authoritative and dictatorial. Having lost it to a little girl, he's further unmanned: revealed as a paper tiger in a tailored suit more interested in profit than human life. Jensen, returned after decades, tells a strange tale of his survival. It's a lie of course, or mostly a lie. He says he crash-landed on a strange planet and is taken in by a society of giant noses who have chicken feet and spindly arms. Their queen, buxom and aroused by Jensen's perfect schnozz, instantly takes a carnal liking to our man and invites him into the royal bedchamber. They start a family. And then they are invaded by an army of giant fingers ridden by disembodied eyeballs. There's a little Robert Heinlein in this section, but more Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter series: lusty, bodice-ripping, muscles-rippling and feats of derring-do. Plympton renders it as pulp epic and the rapt audience assembled for his return laugh him off the stage. We were already at a point in 2001 where notions of heroism were in steep decline. If countries and their citizens undergo the same life cycle as humans, we are in our difficult adolescence now, coming to terms with the things we did to become a nation in our infancy and trying to buck the odds that we kill ourselves from the trauma before reaching adulthood. What Plympton shows in *Mutant Aliens* is a teen's surly rejection of our self-mythology: sure we're glad Jensen is alive, but gimme a break, man, you didn't John Wayne your way out of your jam.

Jensen's first story seems to be at least in part derived from Fred Wolf Films' *Puff the Magic Dragon* (1978) animated CBS special based on the Peter, Paul and Mary song that was itself based on a poem by Leonard Lipton. In it, a boy made catatonic by his depression has a paper doppelgänger of himself created by Puff, a Burgess Meredith-sounding dragon. Puff animates the shade and takes it on a Swiftian adventure where they eventually come upon a dreary hellscape occupied by "living sneezes." The story of a general loss of innocence for a child who ends as the savior for a civilization of noses is too novel a one for there to be two entirely unrelated depictions of it. I like to think that Plympton marrying fingers and noses in an existential battle is another "groaner" about picking, of course, but also about the creation of a piece that is "on the nose" for better or worse. The fingers can represent the finger little Josie

has devoured - the perfection of Jensen's nose (or, rather, his lie about how the perfection of his nose has saved him) is another comment on the commodification of Jensen's image and its absorption into how an entire nation views itself. I like to speculate, too, that if Plympton were creating an homage to the television special, he's doing it with full knowledge of every aspect of the legend that has grown around the show - most notably how it can all be read as a thinly-veiled story about taking drugs (papers and puffing, *n'cest pas*?) as either symptom or cure for mental health issues. If *Mutant Aliens* is about loss of innocence and faith in our foundational myths, it's possible, too, that in some way Peter Yarrow's (the "Peter" of Peter, Paul and Mary) 1970 conviction for statutory rape that was commuted by Jimmy Carter for some reason, permanently stains - at least for me - the wholesome, Pete Seeger/Woody Guthrie cornpone activist vibe of the beloved group. It does me no good to know this. It's just another lead weight in this bag I can never put down.

Josie plays a major role in *Mutant Aliens* as a grown, sexually-liberated woman who from her position as brilliant analyst and astronomer, cuts through Fubar's and her father's lies to dial down into the ugly truth of the matter. Her lunkish, but devoted, boyfriend is so into her he sees his erection as a chainsaw, a piston, a jackhammer. Josie's into it. She uses her wiles, in fact, to manipulate him as she tries to rescue her father from his tormentors, clear his name once he engages on a murderous rampage with a small army of his creation, and eventually have it all (career, husband, father, esteem) once the dust settles. Plympton fans familiar with his style will recognize Josie as one of his sexpots: a caricature of perfection cast in this film as a 50s-appropriate *femme,* a Dorothy Malone-type, if you will, who is the most powerful character in the piece. She's the one responsible for the restoration of order in a piece that boils down to a celebration of male priapism. If there's hope, a future for us, it's female. Jensen's second story is how his drifting capsule intersects with others: abandoned research stations, their test animals still in their cages, and welds all the derelict capsules together into a scientific space station. He figures out a way to make the animals subjects for cross-species insemination and Plympton doesn't have to show how much Jensen enjoys sowing his seed in the broader animal kingdom, but he's irrepressible. As the final ingredient for his vengeance, Jensen exposes the fetuses in their wombs

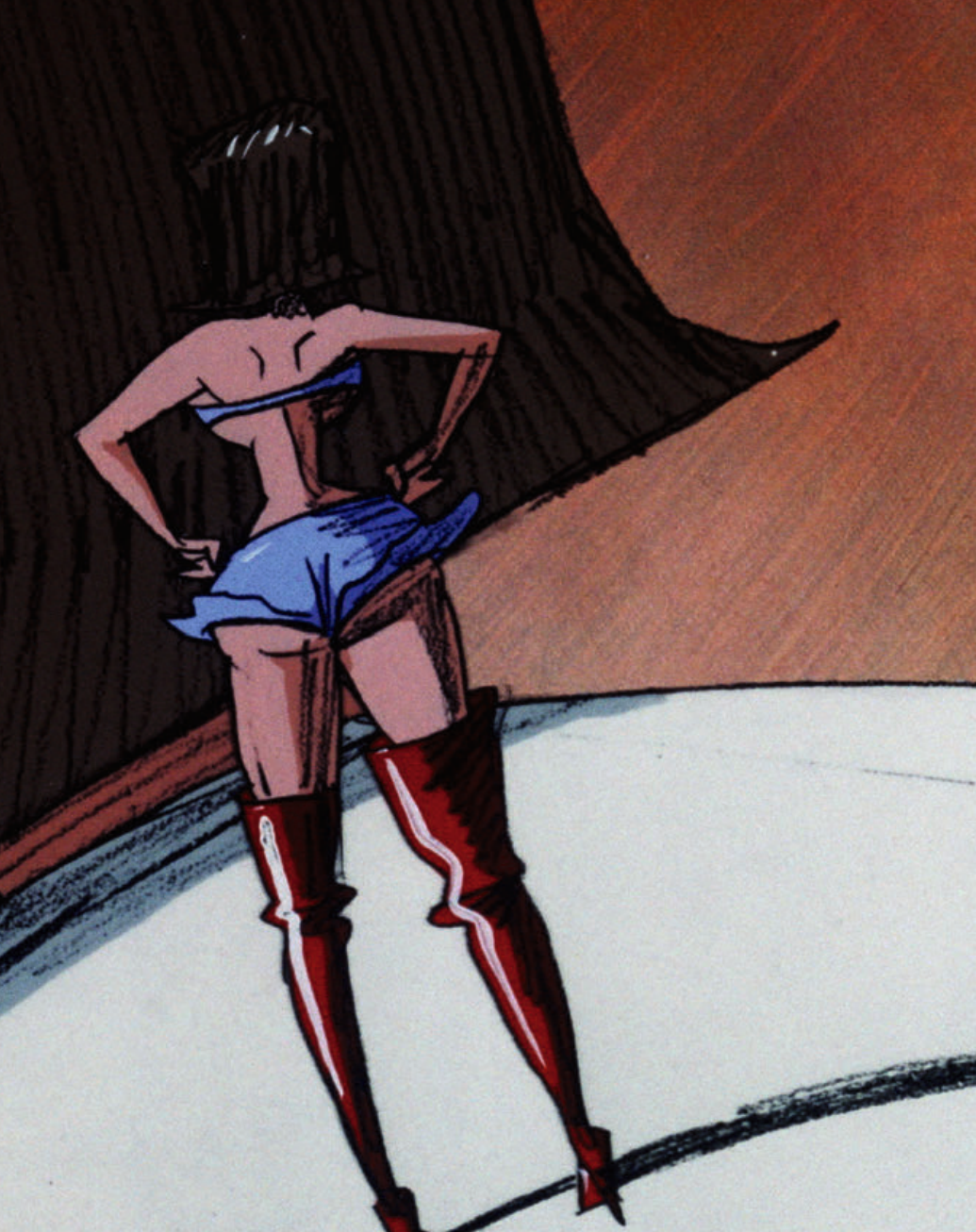
to powerful radiation that graphically detonates his progenies' DNA ladders before reconstructing them in bizarre, voracious ways. This is the little herd Jensen frees on Earth and hundreds fall victim to their wrath. Male sexuality is violent and destructive; female sexuality is creative and restorative. *Mutant Aliens*, you see, is a Frankenstein story, too.

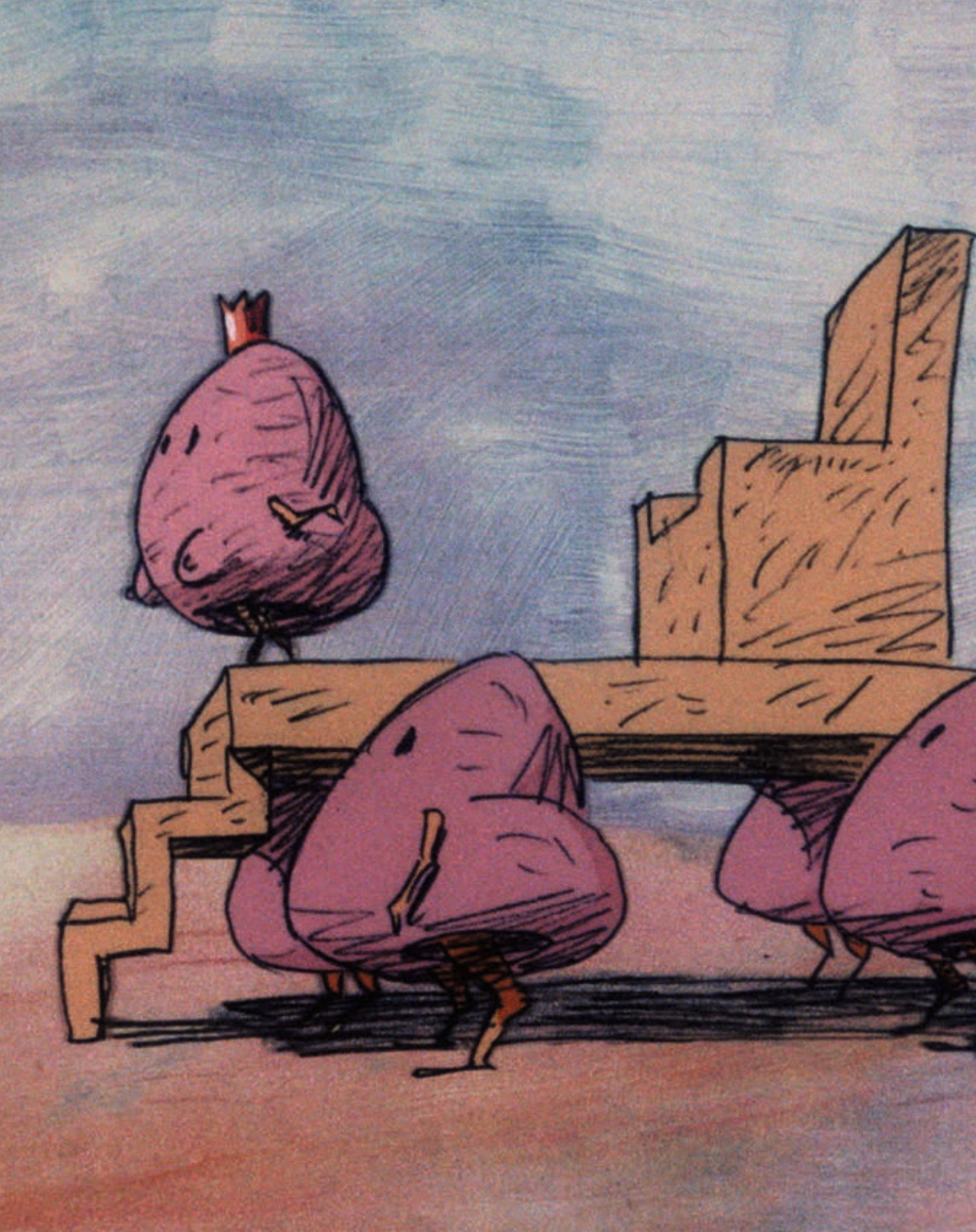
The last twenty minutes of the film is a massive chase sequence that alternates bawdy jokes with elaborately choreographed shenanigans. I appreciated Fubar fellating a giant bomb to a distinctly Kubrickian needle-drop. Slim Pickens got nothing on the Plympton-drawn image of a man distending his jaw unnaturally to slobber it around the tip of a nuclear weapon. The bad guys shoot a satellite into the lower atmosphere that is essentially a telescoping television screen viewable to the entire hemisphere. Another metaphor for the Internet and mass-connectivity - it's also an acknowledgement that if there's something fascists understand, it's the power of controlling the narrative. Jensen finally becomes the hero he's been cast to be through the sacrifice of himself with relatively little notice. If we are to be saved, it will be through the hidden actions of unknown actors. The desire for veneration, even acknowledgement, invalidates the notion of meaningful sacrifice and altruism. The lesson we're to take away from *Mutant Aliens* is everyone has an ulterior motive and yet it's possible to do the right thing so long as you're not expecting material gratification in return. Jensen is mourned in private, the government's ability to communicate its messages on an unprecedented scale is destroyed, and the last images of the picture are of an almost literal pounding of swords into plowshares. It's notable that the first thing the giant screen projects is a sexually-suggestive workout video selling the equivalent of a "shake weight" to a planet of easily-manipulated drones. Sex sells, violence, too, and the chiseled image of male superiority. Don't be a sissy, get yourself a supermodel, buy, buy, buy. Josie finally agrees to be married on her terms ("I'll take that ring now") and a pink cloud in the shape of her dead father coalesces above her in approval of her union.

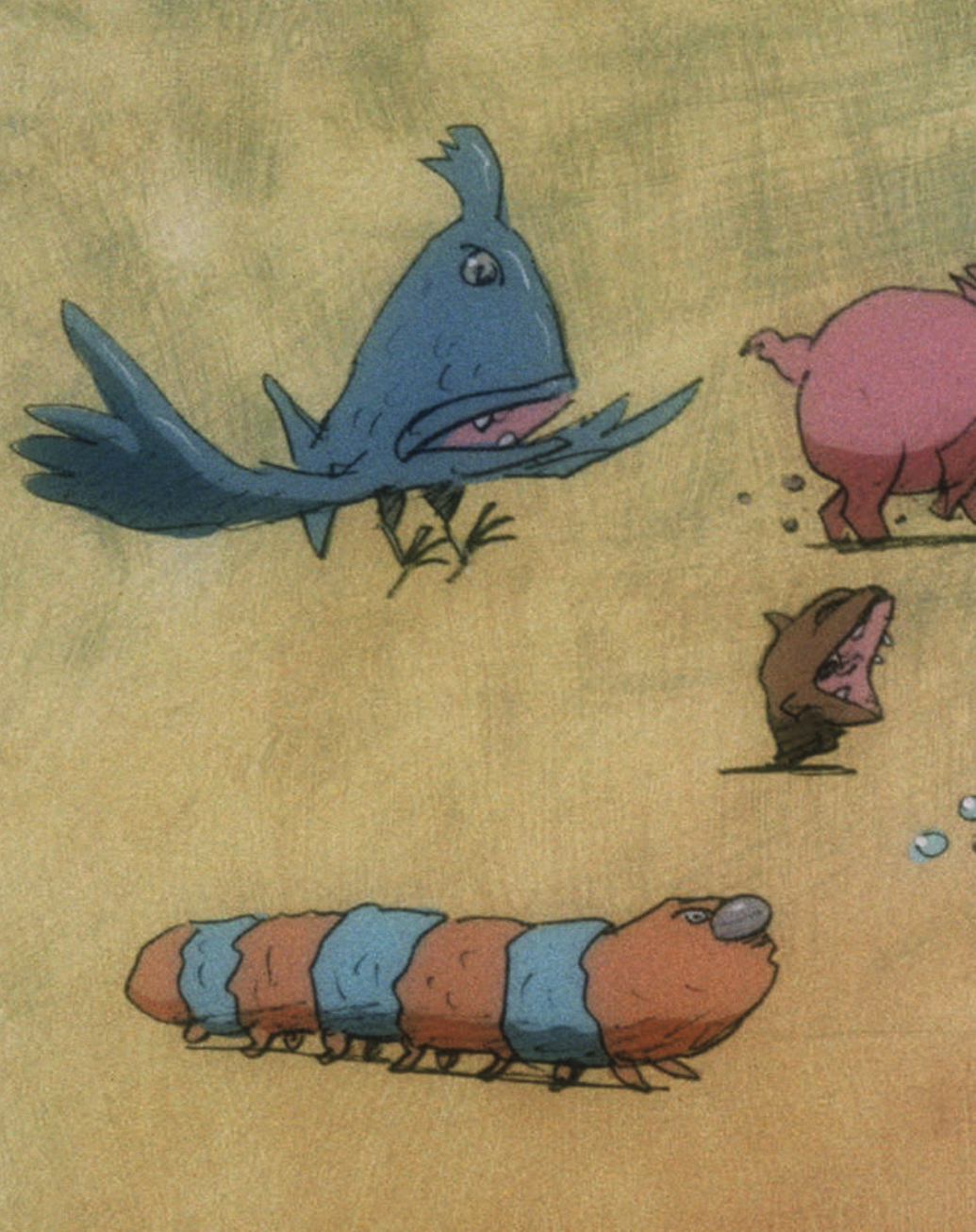
Mutant Aliens is an explosion of invention, of dad jokes, of peepshow pleasures and other naughty bits employed in a 1950s poli-sci-fi camp epic. It's a reflection of us at the turn of the last century based in large part on the work of an author working right around the turn of the previous

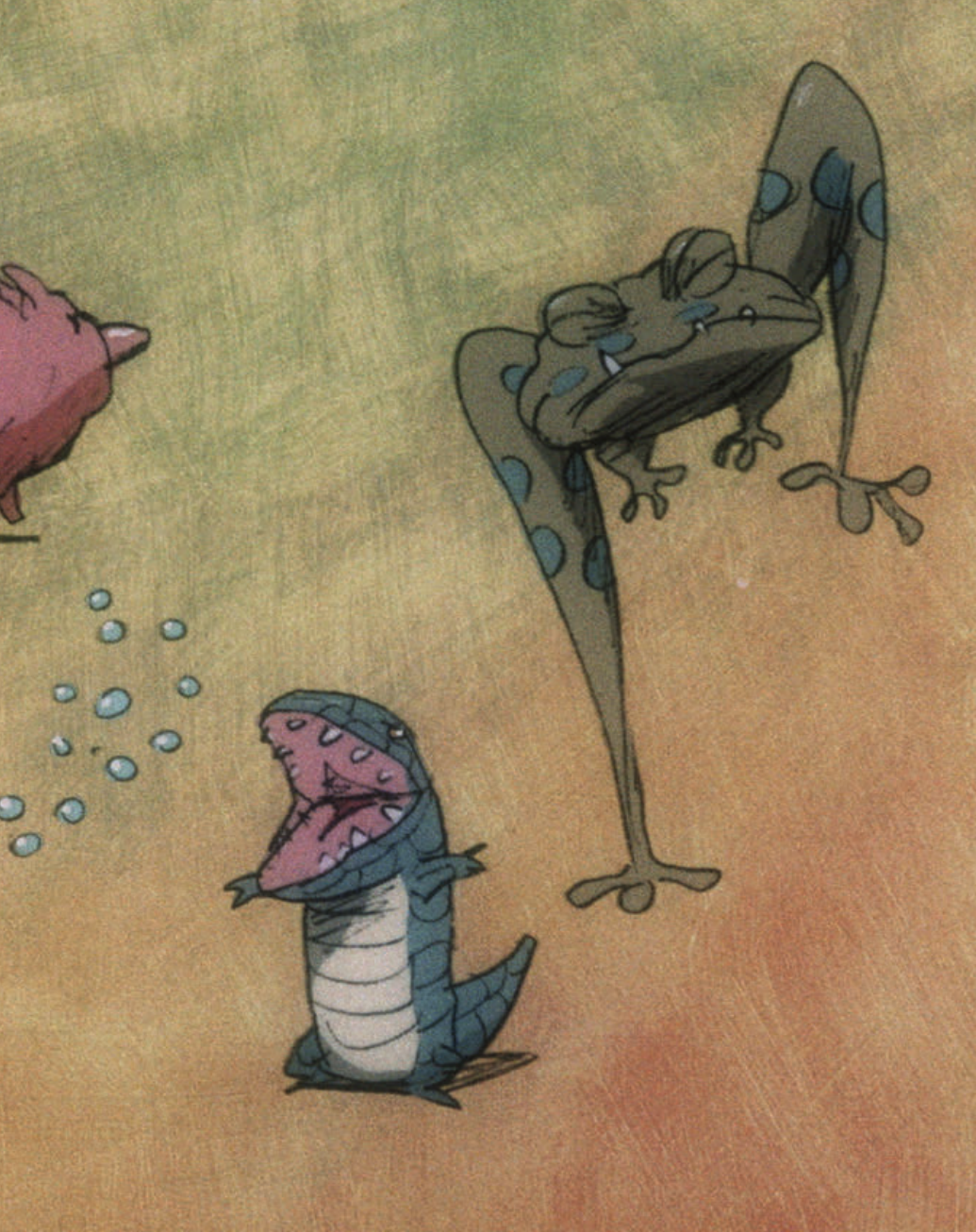
century. They're both marked by that sense of liminality that accompanies every *fin de siècle* in our artistic history: the introspection about the things that brought us into the future, and how little really we understand the consequences of our unfettered, headlong and heedless evolution. What if, Plympton wondered, Laika, the German Shepherd shot into space at the beginning of the Cold War, hadn't died but had been irradiated with some wonderful ray and come back to Earth with vengeance in mind? Better, how does that pulp scenario begin to illustrate the essential baseness and cruelty of Man? How does it expose the petty rivalries between countries on this planet that will threaten to destroy it until it does? How does it expound upon Mary Shelly's proposition that life created by men, without the intervention of women, are apocalyptically infernal? (Frankenstein, after all, is considered to be the first science fiction novel and it's a cautionary one.) This is Plympton's most accessible work not because of the popularity and attendant familiarity of its genre, but because he is able to convey that feeling of deep foreboding that comes with the best of any fiction. Foreboding not necessarily of awful events, but of our own mortality and the unfortunate disease of knowledge that grows like a tumor in you until you lose your senses. We are a nation of marks. It's so easy to make us hard, so easy to get our heart rates up, and so easy to make us promises no one intends ever to keep. All you got at the end is the people you love and who love you back. Everything else is just noise.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times, Washington Post, Criterion, The LA Weekly, NY Post's Decider, NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."









TAKING NO PRISONERS

HOW MUTANT ALIENS LAYS WASTE TO EVERYTHING ON EARTH EXCEPT, THANKFULLY, FOR THE MUTANT ALIENS.

by

Steven Peros

1950's alien invasion science fiction films were literally born in 1950. After the inexplicable (or perhaps explicable…) rash of UFO sightings that made the news in the late 1940's post-war America, Hollywood gambled that viewers had found a new Cinema of the Fantastic to take the place of the temporarily-extinct gothic horror films that had dominated movie screens in pre-war America, courtesy of Universal Pictures (and imitated to varying degrees of success by MGM, Paramount, Columbia, and the poverty row studios). Rather than look down at the dirt to dig up graves of vampires and mummies, Hollywood would now look up to the sky and beyond - to space! - to find horrors even more relevant for an audience that wanted to look forward, not backward, for their chills. While some of these films were pure science fiction, like 1951's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the vast majority could be conjoined as sci-fi/horror. The aliens depicted in these films were meant to scare the viewer first and foremost. Even if the alien ultimately proved to be benign, the buildup to that realization was filled with fear of the unknown as well as fear of the monstrously icky.

Two films went into production simultaneously — one was an A-Picture, the other a B-Picture. And because B pictures were made cheaper and released quicker, *The Man from Planet X* (1951), directed by one of the most resourcefully imaginative directors of the period, Edgar G. Ulmer) made it to movie theaters before its higher-brow competition, *The Thing from Another World* (also 1951), directed by Christian Nyby in the rat-a-tat style of his producer boss, Howard Hawks. These two films set the template which continued through the newly established sub-genre (and arguably to present day): an alien or aliens arrive on Earth (either on purpose or by accident) resulting in two points of view from the affected earthlings: either (1) kill the alien first and ask questions later OR (2) try to understand the alien, communicate with it, even help it. This resulted in either "the smart men with guns vs the dumb reckless liberal scientists" found in *The Thing from Another World* or "the dumb fearful men with guns vs the lone smart compassionate liberal scientist" found in Jack Arnold's *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), with a humanist script co-written by a young scribe named Ray Bradbury.

As the genre evolved into the mid/late 1950's, teenagers found their way into the alien invasion shenanigans, as when Steve McQueen and his high school guy-and-gal friends had to deal with *The Blob* (1958). But regardless of the specifics of the scenario, 1950's alien invasion cinema insisted that you pick a side, as did 1950's America in general.

Bill Plympton's fourth animated feature, *Mutant Aliens*, shot in 2000 when the maverick animator/filmmaker was in his mid fifties, asks no such question. It embraces the attitude "Never trust anyone over 30" and depicts how the guys with guns AND the brainiacs with laboratories are BOTH ignorant, naive, incompetent, villainous, or all of the above. And what's more, it doesn't have a heck of a lot of regard for those *under* 30 either. One suspects George Carlin would have loved *Mutant Aliens*. But more on that in a moment.

Plympton explained the idea's genesis on Animation World Network: "I happened to see a picture of Laika, the Russian Cosmonaut dog, in a magazine. My mind wandered, as it usually does when I feel an idea coming - whatever happened to Laika? Is he still up there? He must be

mad as hell! And there are probably lots of other experimental animals up there, circling the earth - monkeys, mice, etc. What would happen if they banded together and plotted revenge on earthlings?"

It's that inspiration that plays out so uniquely in *Mutant Aliens*, setting it apart from not only the alien invasion films of the 1950's and beyond, but also Tim Burton's 1996, PG-13 sendup, *Mars Attacks!* In the unapologetically R-rated *Mutant Aliens*, the only truly "good guys" are the aliens. Humans essentially suck. Whether incompetent at their job, sex obsessed to a fault, money worshipping, gun crazy, self absorbed, or all of the above — Humans are the problem here on Earth, not visiting aliens.

There's a beautiful purity to the movie's philosophy. It's the sort of crystalline simplicity found in the anarchic humor and world view of Plympton's best work. And it comes from, to my mind, his filmmaking willfully having never divorced itself from the joys, pains, and passions of adolescence, yet expressed via the hand of a Master Craftsman with decades of life and art under his belt. It's what we find in the writing Ray Bradbury, whose writer's lair was filled with the toys and joys of his youth until he took his last breath. It is what makes the cinema of Jerry Lewis so definitively silly. But since Jerry himself was on display, his boyish clowning became uncomfortable to watch as he grew into his fifties and beyond. Plympton has no such issue since it is the line drawings of his imagination on display, not Plympton himself.

As a filmmaker, Plympton seizes on the Billy Wilder adage about Beginnings: "Grab them by the throat and don't let go." *Mutant Aliens* opens with the media and mob at the scene of an alien landing. In mere seconds, the historic event devolves/evolves into a phantasmagoria of panic, carnage, and lots of screaming. Limbs are severed, blood spurts from stumps, background action and foreground action run rampant and collide, and all of it witnessed through a singular news camera (even after the cameraman is evidently slaughtered out of frame), paying homage to both George Pal's 1953 film of *The War of the Worlds* and Orson Welles' infamous 1938 radio adaptation of the same novel. We then flash back to the events leading up to this event.

Unlike the anarchy-lite of Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (due to MPAA ratings constraints), Plympton proceeds in *Mutant Aliens* with the relaxed air of "I can do whatever the hell I want," much like the raunchy and violent, R-rated (and sometimes X-rated) feature animation in Ralph Bakshi's work in the 1970's like *Heavy Traffic* and *Fritz the Cat*. It will also recall for many the unapologetically adolescent fusion of sci-fi, gore, and sex from a segment or two of Gerald Potterton's *Heavy Metal* (1981).

After its wild opening, the film flashes back two decades to the events that got us there. American astronaut Earl Jensen is shot into space, and then deliberately sabotaged by the greedy, power-obsessed Dr. Frubar for his own nefarious purposes. Frubar (the similarity to "FUBAR" does not go unnoticed), whose blonde coif, ill-fitting suit, lust for money, and ability to lie to the public to make himself look good made me doublecheck the movie's release date (perhaps we should add "prophet" to Plympton's writer-director-animator hyphenate). Frubar pushes the handy button that empties the rocket's gas tank and then lays the blame on Jensen's little daughter Josie, who was proudly watching her daddy from the control room.

Twenty years later finds Josie an astronomer who has spent her life never giving up hope that her Dad is still somewhere out there and still alive. Josie recalls the attractive "female scientist with agency" often found in sci-fi horror of the 1950's, usually played by Mara Corday, Faith Domergue, or Mala Powers, who have to keep one or two horny male leads at bay while they solve the riddle of how to defeat the invading giant-flying-alien-turkey or atomically revived Rhedosaurus. Josie's first loves are her telescope and her Dad, but she manages to keep her boyfriend satisfied by engaging in frequent sexual escapades in the observatory. The boyfriend has in fact come to propose marriage, but before you can say "coitus interruptus", Dad has re-entered the atmosphere, leading to a genuinely moving and beautiful visual sequence when the daughter's car chases her father's returning vessel across the landscape to its landing spot on earth.

The now-bearded Jensen recounts a story for the media of how he survived after landing on an alien planet. Let's talk about this first batch of aliens because the film offers two. Can Bill Plympton design an alien like

those found in the *Star Wars* Cantina or on *This Island Earth*? Of course he can -- however, instead he has fun deconstructing the aliens of cinema down to their component parts. Aliens of the past often had a monstrously exaggerated eye(s) or mouth or enlarged head. In *Mutant Aliens*, Plympton seems to be saying, "Oh hell, let's make this a planet of human-sized aliens that are an assortment of anthropomorphized body parts." There are creatures who are just a nose, a rogue index finger, or a big foot, all with their own little feet, eyes, mouths, etc. Jensen then recounts how he fell into favor with the leader, the horny Queen Nose (for want of a better term), and the movie does not shy away from Jensen engaging in frequent carnal knowledge of her nasal cavity in full view of the cheering alien masses.

Ultimately, we come to realize that Jensen's story is entirely made up. The truth is, Jensen was saved by intercepting another lost spaceship from earth in which animals were sent to study the effects of space travel (bringing us back to the Laika-the-cosmonaut-dog inspiration). But space has caused these lab animals to have evolved into oversized mutations of frogs, dogs, pigs, reptiles, etc. And they love their new astronaut friend. In fact, the love is so profound that — Jensen has sex with all of them, cross-breeding a next, greater level of mutant: stampeding pigs with javelin tongues, frogs with eight-foot long legs that can stomp you into a bloody pulp, and cutest of all is a kitten (or is it a guinea pig?) who disarms you with its Margaret Keane-like Big Eyes, only to eat you and excrete you simultaneously into a compact fecal brick, all in two seconds flat. With this, Plympton one-ups prior "cute little thing is actually a vicious monster" gags from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*'s killer bunny-rabbit to *Jurassic Park's* Dilophosaurus. It may be the movie's biggest laugh.

Along with Laika, Plympton has also mentioned being inspired by the novel "Geek Love," written by his friend, Katherine Dunn. The book tells the tale of a couple who set about to breed a next level of "freak" for their ailing circus by inbreeding other sideshow freaks and adding drugs and radioactive materials to the process to make them even freakier. (It's no surprise that Tim Burton has had the film rights tied up for years.) Ultimately, all of the mutant aliens — and their leader Jensen — are united in a desire for revenge against the greedy men and the institutions who

knowingly sent them into space to their likely deaths. In this latter part of the movie, Plympton, a self professed western movie fan, utilizes an Ennio Morricone-style theme that unavoidably brings to mind Sergio Leone's often revenge-laden spaghetti westerns. Jensen wants Dr. Frubar's blood. And, as you will see, he gets it.

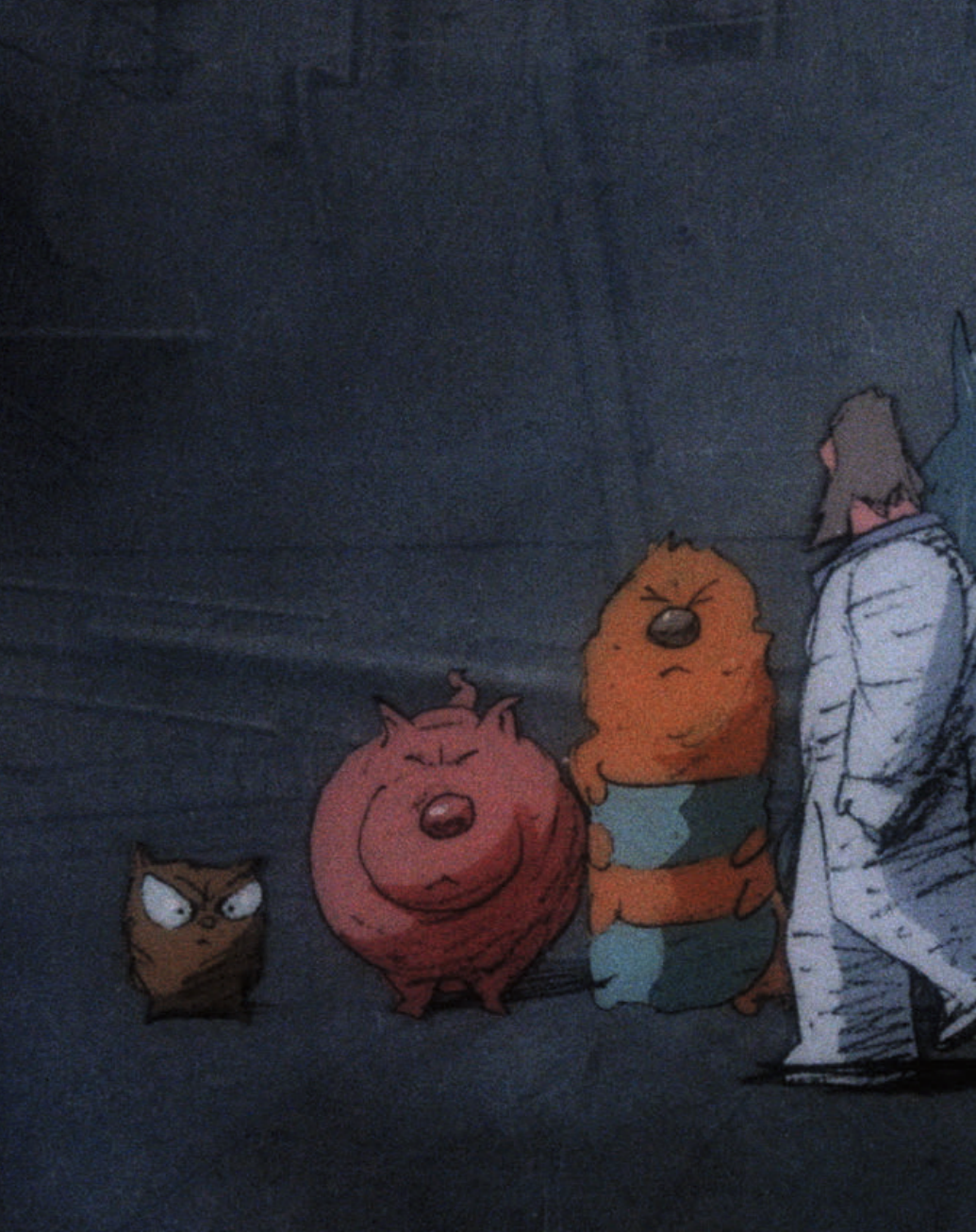
Plympton has said he ascribes to the philosophy that one of the uses of animation is to have people do things that they can't do in real life. But since visual effects now allow just about anything to happen on screen in live action cinema, Plympton instead will use animation to make his characters do things that no actor (or actor's agent or lawyer) would *agree to do* on screen. Fellate a missile prototype ala Dr. Frubar? You got it! Get joyfully screwed by your boyfriend in an open-top convertible? Piece o' cake! Bestiality in space, not to mention sex with a lusty Queen Nose? Hell yeah! The animation offers Plympton a "get out of jail free" card, allowing every frame within every sequence to be at once perverse, joyous, furious, self satisfied, and subversive.

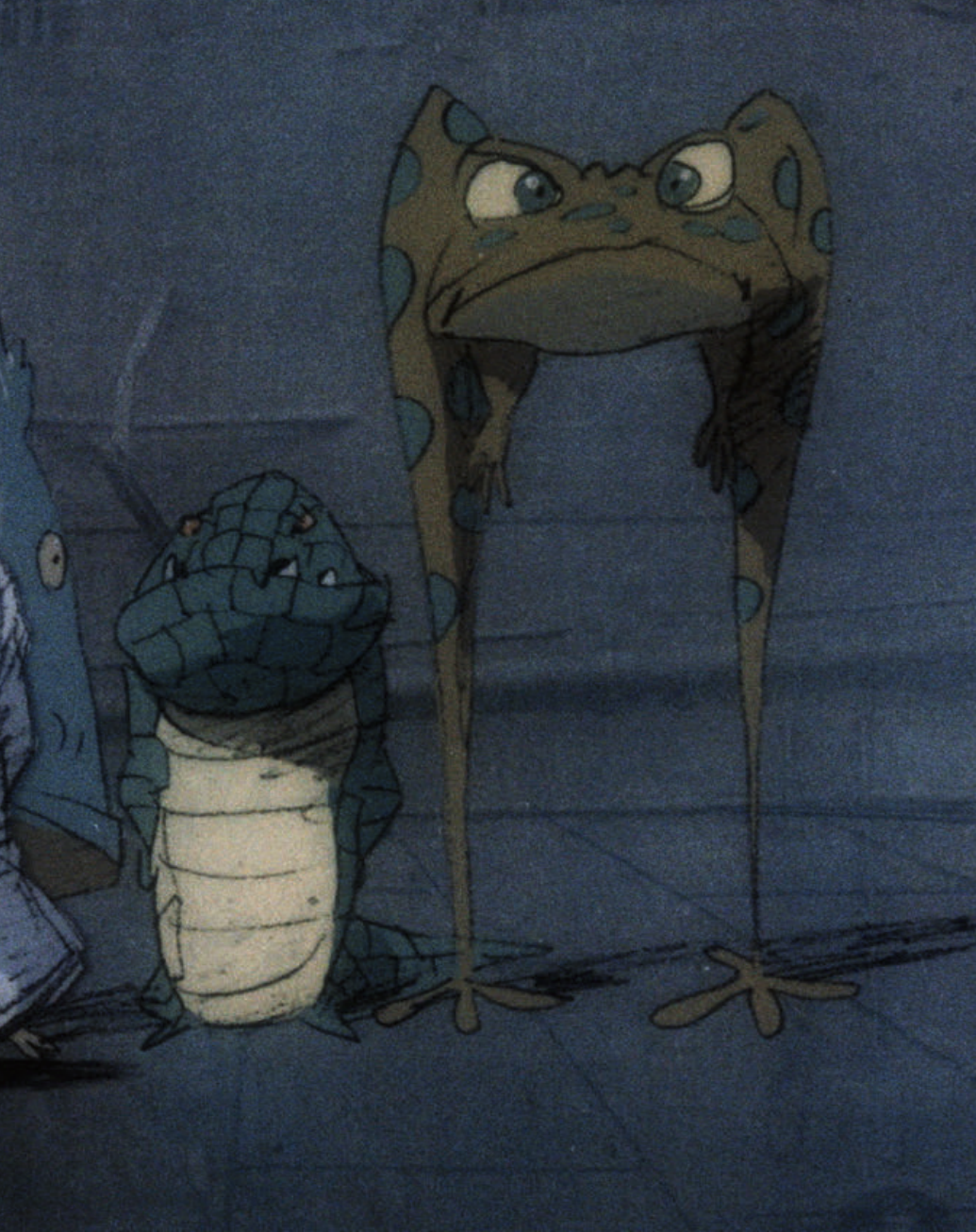
1950's Science Fiction has always been about creepy aliens who will rip you apart, government men in suits of whom we should be wary, ruthless military men who just want to blow things up, and lust-filled adolescents looking to have sex during any break in the terror. Plympton throws it all together and dials everything up to 11 to glorious effect. In a way, he is recalling — and then escalating — the anarchic chaos from one of his other major childhood inspirations: Warner Brother cartoons. Lord knows Plympton is probably just showing us what some of his mentors wish they could have shown if given the chance. After all, how many guns are blasted in the faces of Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, and Elmer Fudd? How many times does Wile E. Coyote or Sylvester the Cat get into the sort of physical mayhem that should have resulted in blood, gore, and dismemberment, and yet did not?

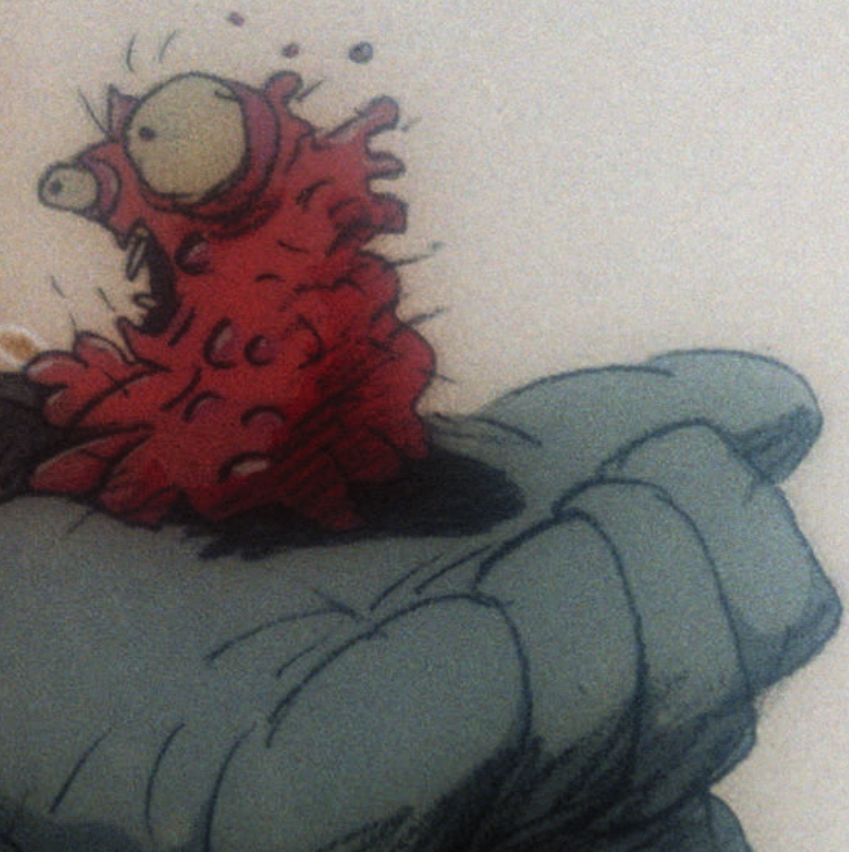
But as I wrote earlier, Plympton thinks everyone is fair game — even his hero, Jensen, whose grotesque demise is played for a laugh, not a tear. The men in suits and uniforms are bad, labs are bad, and the American flag which waves above it all is to be questioned and held accountable. And if they won't comply, a cute cat/guinea pig will eat them and shit them out in one fell swoop.

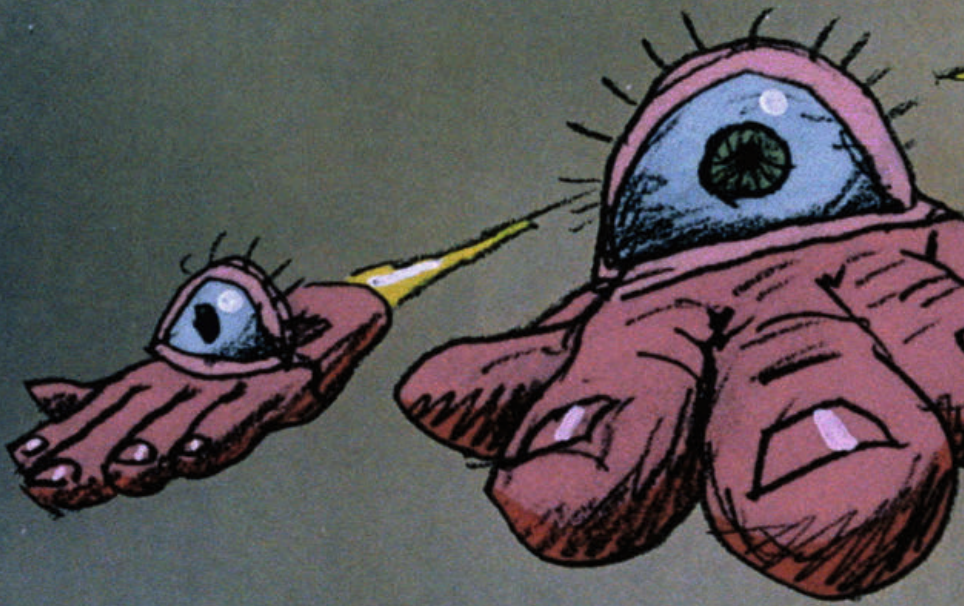
When I was a young man attending New York University's Film School, I saw the 1987 short that put Plympton on the map — his Oscar-nominated three-minute *Your Face*. It is on the short list of movie-going moments that blew my mind. Ever since, if I was in a relationship and considering having it get to the next level of seriousness, I would show my intended *Your Face* and gauge their reaction. If it was anything less than jaw-agape/awestruck/moved-to-tears, she wasn't the gal for me. Fortunately, it always seemed to prove the girl was of the right stuff (but I'm twice-divorced, so what do I know?). I'm not quite sure one could - or should - use *Mutant Aliens* as a similar relationship-qualifying barometer. But I will say that if you spark to it, and so does your intended, you should mate for life.

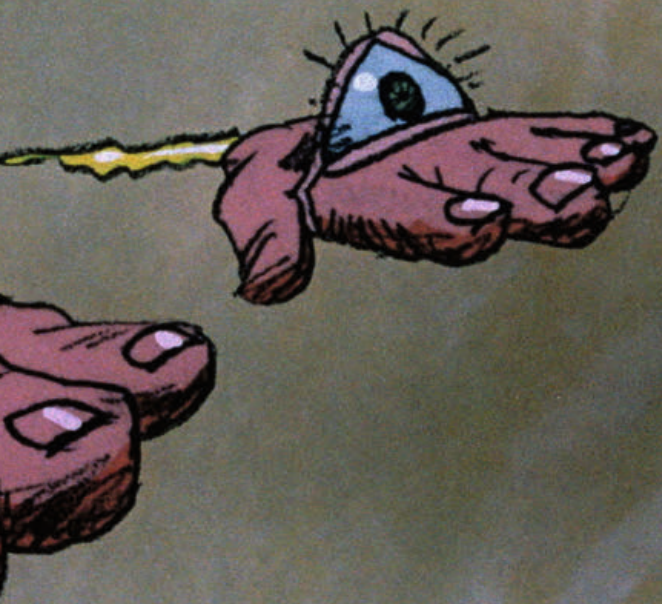
STEVEN PEROS is a screenwriter, playwright, comic book writer, and film journalist/historian whose writing on film has been published in *MovieMaker, Village Voice*, and *Huffington Post*. Along with providing numerous film commentary tracks, his cinema books include *H.M. Wynant: You Must Believe!*, *Giant Beast Cinema,* and *Cinema Bizarro.* He created the graphic novel series, *Stoker & Wells*, wrote the stage play and screenplay for Peter Bogdanovich's *The Cat's Meow*, sold TV pilots to NBC and MTV, and wrote screenplays for talent as varied as Dolly Parton and Jackie Chan. For more on Steven, or to contact him, please visit www.stevenperos.com.

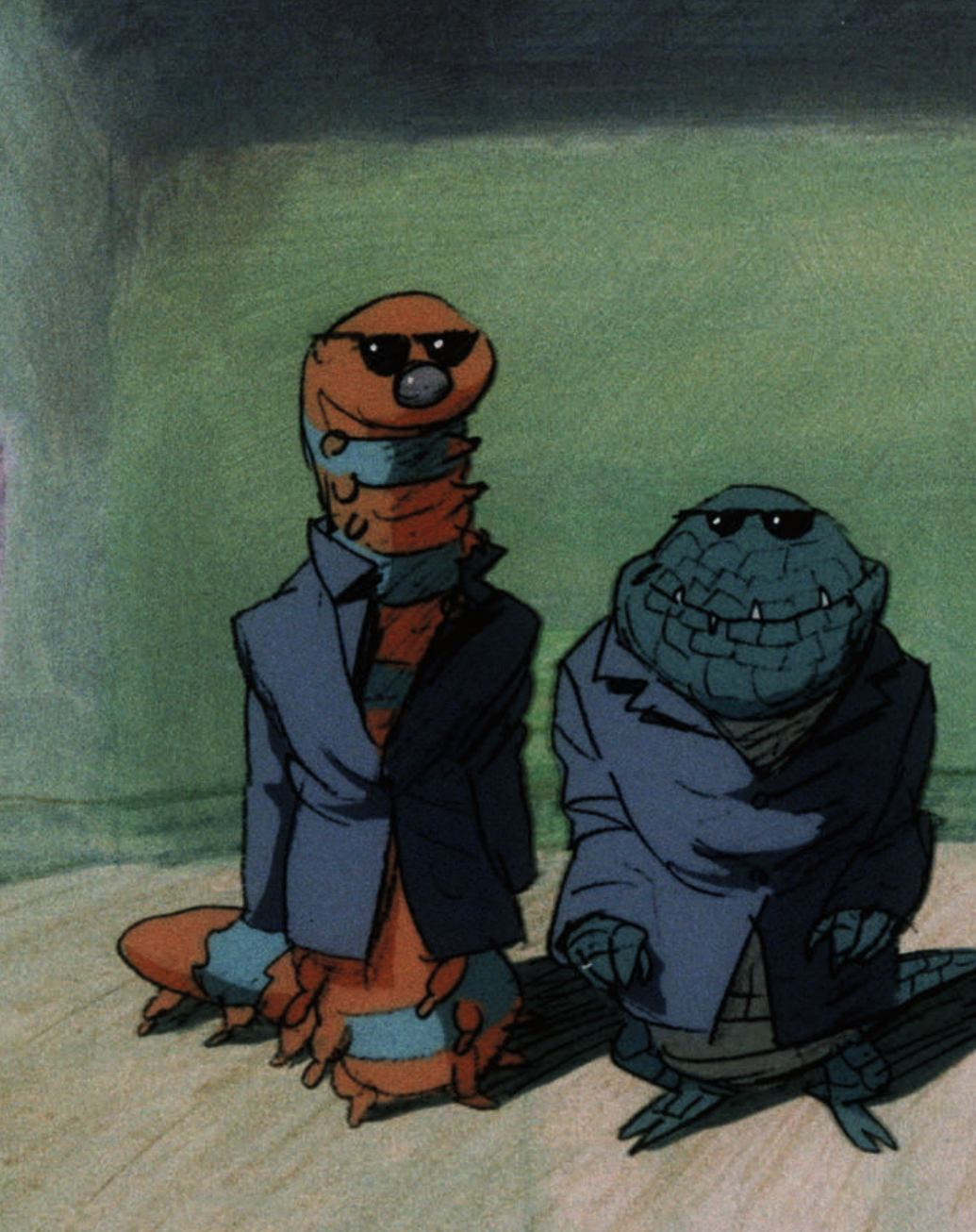


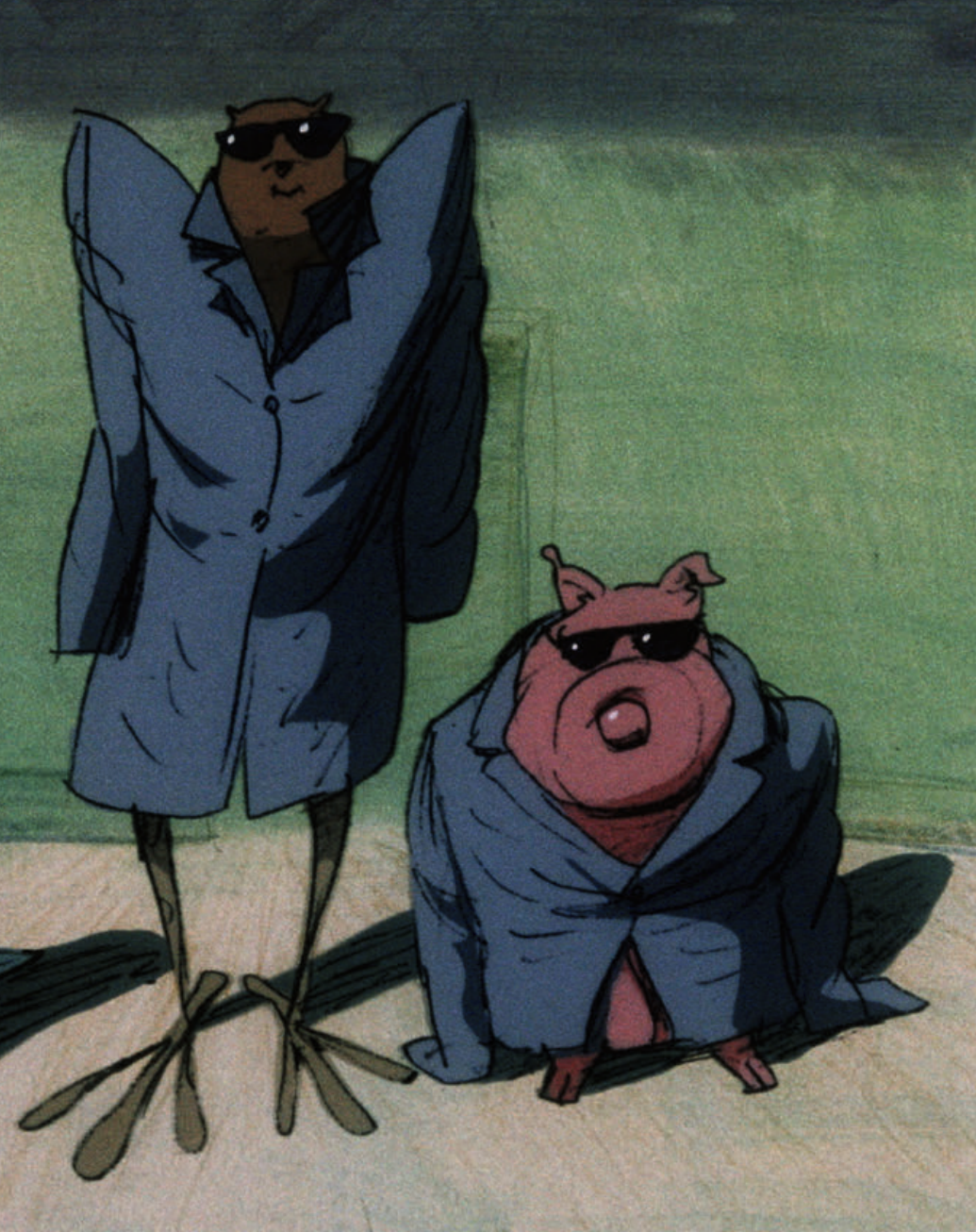












Notes on the Film Restoration:

MUTANT ALIENS was restored in 2K in 2019 from the original 35mm camera negatives and sound elements, with Bill Plympton's participation and approval.

Special Thanks to:

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